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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DHAKA 000491

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN ADVISER EXPLAINS CTG'S VISION DURING
AMBASSADOR'S COURTESY CALL

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) As it prepares for elections by the end of 2008, the Caretaker Government is focused on ensuring the continuity of the reforms it initiated after coming to office in January 2007, according to Foreign Adviser Iftekhar Chowdhury. He noted that a key component of its strategy for achieving this goal was to dilute the power of the Prime Minister by strengthening the Presidency. The Caretaker Government (CTG) was counting on the support of civil society and the international community as the political process moved forward. While Iftekhar presented a logical, compelling vision, we are not clear how fully the rest of the CTG and the Army share that vision.

Foreign Adviser Welcomes Ambassador to Bangladesh

2. (C) The Ambassador paid an introductory call on Foreign Affairs Advisor Dr. Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury April 29. Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker), the MFA's DG Americas, and the Director of the Foreign Adviser's office also participated in the meeting. Iftekhar recalled fondly his tenure in New York as Bangladesh's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, noting his excellent working relationships with the Deputy Secretary (who was USUN Permanent Representative at the time) as well as with Ambassador Bolton. Iftekhar noted that Bangladesh and the U.S. had worked together to push through much of the UN reform package that the USG had proposed.

3. (C) The Foreign Adviser said that he was planning to travel to Pakistan May 6 - 9, and would meet with the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, PPP Leader Asif Zardari, and PML-N Leader Nawaz Sharif. He planned to deliver a message from the Chief Adviser to the Pakistani Government and hoped to "strike while the iron was hot." Iftekhar did not give any indication of what message he would be carrying.

CTG Hopeful About Weathering Food Crisis

4. (C) The Ambassador expressed interest in reports that the Bangladeshi economy was beginning to rebound. He told Iftekhar that the USG was responding to Bangladesh's food aid needs and hoped to soon be able to provide an additional

\$10 million in food through WFP. The Ambassador also noted that we would be making a contribution to efforts to respond to the emerging famine in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Foreign Adviser, who had been given responsibility for coordination in Sylhet Division, said the GOB had virtually finished procurement for the upcoming "boro" crop in that area. If the boro harvest meets expectations, the food crisis should be "behind us," according to Iftekhar. (Comment: This may be true in terms of gross food supplies, but it still will not fully address the issue of affordability of food for the most vulnerable populations.) Iftekhar noted that the GOB had a great deal of experience dealing with food issues and was confident they would be able to manage the current situation.

15. (C) Turning to the global food situation, Iftekhar said he had recently proposed in Accra that the UNSYG should be personally involved in coordinating the global political response. He said he was pleased that Ban Ki Moon had recently announced that he would be setting up a group of eminent persons to look at the food situation at the global level. Bangladesh had provided input into that decision. Also, Iftekhar revealed that Japan had suggested that Bangladesh should provide technical assistance for a "green revolution" initiative in Africa.

Political Process Moves Forward

16. (C) Turning to elections, Iftekhar said that Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed would announce an "approximate" election date soon. Iftekhar acknowledged that determining the precise date for polls was within the purview of the

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Election Commission. He told the Ambassador that the international community would be happy with the proposed timetable. Iftekhar added that he and the other four Advisers who had participated in the informal dialogue with the political parties would report their findings to the Chief Adviser on April 30. He said it was important to have "broken bread" with the parties. His personal advantage as a participant in the talks had been his familiarity with all of the players, many of whom he had hosted during their foreign travels.

17. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's question, Iftekhar noted that the CTG had to find a way to get the parties to endorse the reforms as well. The CTG could not afford to be seen as wanting to perpetuate its own existence. Still, the CTG wanted to see the reforms that had been started endure past December. Iftekhar acknowledged a danger it would all go away unless the parties were brought on board.

A Magna Carta for BD?

18. (C) For this reason, the CTG was proposing that the parties agree to a "Magna Carta" before elections which would be endorsed by the nation. In return, the parties would be assured of gaining power after elections. Iftekhar said that there was also discussion of changes in the institution of the Presidency. The "Magna Carta" could include amendments that would result in a sharing of power between the President and Prime Minister. When questioned about the need to amend the Constitution, Iftekhar noted that this document "had not been written by God." Iftekhar acknowledged that this proposal had not yet been endorsed by the entire government.

19. (C) Looking at the formation of the next government, Iftekhar admitted that the transition would have to be carefully calibrated. He suggested a coalition arrangement in which the majority party would fill most of the seats in the cabinet but reserve some for other parties based on their share of the vote. The President would be responsible for

protecting institutions like the Army and the independent commissions. This would ensure civilian control, but achieve a balance of power. Eventually, this would also allow the country to overcome the differences between the two former Prime Ministers. Iftekhar said he did not think that the former PMs would want to return to office since the post of PM would be diminished under the new system.

A Need for International Support

¶10. (C) In order to achieve this outcome, there would be a need for carefully calibrated support from Bangladesh's international partners. The Ambassador assured the Foreign Adviser that the USG would support the return to democracy. Iftekhar said that we needed to work this partnership more closely "than our cousins have done (referring to Pakistan)."

Iftekhar said that Bangladesh could prove to be a model for the world, and in a generation could become like Singapore, albeit with stronger democratic institutions. In addition, Bangladesh was a moderate Muslim state, albeit one under pressure from other forces including those from the Middle East. The Ambassador highlighted the need to deny space to terrorists in Bangladesh, in part because this would make it easier for us to deal with radicalism in other parts of the world. The Foreign Adviser agreed with this analysis.

Progress on Institutional Reforms Vital for the Future...

¶11. (C) Iftekhar noted that the CTG's goal was for the country to be known as a responsible international actor. He boasted that "no bombs had gone off, no shots had been fired in anger by the state," during the CTG's tenure. The challenge, he said, was to institutionalize these achievements. Iftekhar claimed that we were seeing a reassertion of the Bangladeshi middle class' interests. Focusing on civil society's "middle class" values, Iftekhar said the CTG would not back down over the controversial Women's Development Policy, despite opposition from Islamic fundamentalists. He said that the Policy would be passed

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before the end of the government's term in December.

¶12. (C) Summarizing, Iftekhar said that the CTG was trying to move ahead in four baskets of reforms: electoral; anti corruption; governance; and institution building. In each area the government needed to have buy in from the middle class. Iftekhar said he had great faith in this class, which had modern values and whose members made up the bulk of the civil service and the army. He noted that they were also the backbone of the thriving NGO community. While at times these values were criticized for being too Western, Iftekhar said the CTG considered them universal and defined the "Spirit of 1/11."

...Domestic and International Pressure Needed

¶13. (C) Hopefully, the force of domestic public opinion and pressure from Bangladesh's friends would help keep the reforms in place, according to Iftekhar. He highlighted the establishment of an independent Election Commission and Public Service Commission. (As an aside, Iftekhar acknowledged that some of these changes had been difficult for an entrenched civil service accustomed to "protecting democracy, not practicing it.") He also reiterated the GOB's commitment to establishing a Human Rights Commission. Iftekhar said that the government could not be allowed to deny human rights, and no government could be allowed to use violence to keep itself in office. The main challenge moving forward, Iftekhar said, was to choose the right kind of people for the commission. The CTG was quietly looking for individuals with the right profile and solid international reputations.

¶14. (C) Iftekhar said that Bangladesh faced a problem in adjusting the culture of the administration. Iftekhar said that the Anti Corruption Commission had been fairly active, and he hoped it would remain so. He acknowledged the importance of having the right individuals in these independent commissions, and said that the right man was in the job as ACC Commissioner. Iftekhar noted he had worked closely with the ACC Chairman when the latter had been Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff. Working together (with Iftekhar in NY), the two had expanded Bangladesh's role in international peacekeeping. By expanding into non-English speaking countries like the Ivory Coast and Congo, Bangladesh had grown to be one of the two leading contributors to PKO.

¶15. (C) Iftekhar admitted that the separation of the judiciary from the executive would not be easy to complete, since it went against 150 years of tradition and vested interest. Those who favored the previous situation complained that the judicial system now moved much more slowly.

Labor Issues and Trade

¶16. (C) Looking at the Middle East, Iftekhar said it had been a challenge for Bangladesh to work with these countries on worker rights issues. The UAE had signed a labor agreement with Bangladesh, and Oman would soon do so. These countries did not normally place much emphasis on worker rights. Bangladesh had to be conscious of the need to protect this important source of employment and remittances, but wanted to ensure the best possible conditions for its workers.

¶17. (C) The Foreign Adviser said that he would save discussion of readymade garment exports for another time, but noted that he had written to every U.S. Member of Congress arguing for increased market access. Bangladesh was making a huge effort in this regard. The Ambassador alerted the Foreign Adviser to a recent report by the AFL-CIO on the shrimp industry in Bangladesh. While we had seen progress in the EPZs and in some parts of the shrimp industry, the picture was not so positive with respect to other parts of the shrimp industry and to RMG manufacturing outside the EPZs. It was important that Bangladesh make progress on worker rights issues.

Comment

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¶18. (C) The Foreign Adviser was relaxed during the meeting and clearly presented the CTG's vision for ensuring the continuity of reforms through a carefully managed political process. Still, there are a number of details that will need to be resolved, and it will be important for the CTG to find a way to get the political parties to agree to participate in the process. Iftekhar puts a great deal of stock into the ability of civil society to put pressure on the parties to play along. While we agree that the desire for reform is widely shared, the CTG needs to realize that its own popularity is slipping by the day. Also, it is not clear whether the Army and the CTG are fully in agreement about the way forward.
Moriarty